HOW ABOUT LOVE?
March 5, 2006

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Psalm 25:1–10
Genesis 9:8–17
Mark 1:9–15

"Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord,
and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Psalm 25:6 (NRSV)

Eternal God, our Father, praise be to you
for your unwavering goodness to your children:
for mercies that fall like rain on the just and the unjust;
for words that find us in our seasons of not-knowing;
for songs your love has taught our hearts to sing;
for coincidental happenings which, viewed in retrospect,
speak of your gentle leading and your care;
for good memories and true hopes, and every thought of you.

Ernest T. Campbell
Where Cross the Crowded Ways: Prayers of a City Pastor

Dear God, as we begin our Lenten journey again,
silence in us any voice but your own.
And startle us again with your steadfast love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

During a memorial service for a young woman—wife, mother, with a successful career, who died decades before she should have—several of her friends came forward, one at a time, and delivered reminiscences and reflections on her life. They said she loved life, loved her husband, loved her children, loved her job. They said she loved her garden and her friends and her church. One of them departed from the norm, came to the lectern and said,

> 525,600 minutes, moments so dear,
> 525,600 minutes, how do you measure, measure a year?
> How about love?
> How do you measure the life of a woman or a man?

How about love?

It's from *Rent*, the Broadway musical and motion picture. The cast is a company of young adults, living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, each struggling to make it, to survive as musicians, composers, dancers, social activists, struggling to find out what life is all about and to pay the rent. Several of them have HIV/AIDS. One in particular, Angel, is very sick. Several of them attend an HIV/AIDs support group. Sitting in a circle in an empty community center gym, reflecting on the future and what it will mean for them, one young man quietly asks, "Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care?"

It's a brave and poignant story of people living with a fairly high degree of alienation—from families, from society at large, hanging on to one another for support, friendship, encouragement, love. They are family. On occasion they even become something like church for one another. They ask, for themselves and for all of us, "Will someone care?" And they sing, "How do you measure a life? How about love?"

And so we begin the Lenten season, the somber season before Holy Week—Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday—and Easter, Resurrection Day. It is a time when Christians remember the great story of Jesus and his love and turn inward and reflect and self examine. It begins, for many, with the imposition of ashes, a liturgical reminder of human mortality. Traditionally Lent has been a time for penitence, confession, repentance. And I propose that you and I begin this journey, this year, slightly differently, by pondering the gift of love—God's love and the love God's love awakens in human hearts.

How about love?

The suggestion is made by the psalmist. Whoever is speaking in Psalm 25, which we read together this morning, knows what it means to be alienated and alone:

> O my God, in you I trust;
> do not let me be put to shame;
> do not let my enemies exult over me.

Whoever is speaking here knows what it feels like to fail, to be fired, let go, downsized, rejected, dumped, cut off.

Whoever is speaking here has done something he or she is not particularly proud of, something that he cannot forget and that he fears may have somehow forever destroyed or at least damaged his standing with God.

“Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions,” he prays.

The redeeming thing about this writer, however, is that someone has told him a secret: God’s anger doesn’t last forever. As a matter of fact, the basic character of God is not what he and all of us suspect—a remote judge who evaluates our character and behavior and metes out appropriate blessings or punishment. No, the fundamental character of God is “steadfast love.”

“According to your steadfast love remember me,” he writes. “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness.”

It’s a wonderful Hebrew word, *chesed*, that is translated “steadfast love.” It occurs no fewer than 180 times in the Bible, always about God. It means mercy, compassion. It comes from the Hebrew word for womb. It is like a mother’s unconditional, unrelenting, indestructible, fierce love for her child. It is a love that will never give up, a love that will follow and pursue and understand and forgive and reclaim a lost child no matter where he goes, no matter what she has done.

Suddenly, everything is different. If there is guilt, now it is not because a rule has been broken but because God has been disappointed. God’s steadfast love has been betrayed. If there is confession and repentance, it is because God’s steadfast love invites us to be confident about God’s forgiveness and loving embrace. If there is alienation and isolation and the dryness of the desert about our lives, there is an announcement—that we are not alone, that even if everyone else in the world has abandoned us and given up on us, God has not. God will not.

It is the very best news. The steadfast love of God.

Pope Benedict issued his first papal encyclical a month ago and surprised everybody. Everybody expected former Cardinal Ratzinger, the conservative enforcer of Catholic orthodoxy, to say something about “the dictatorship of relativity,” which sounded to many of us like an attack on people we admire and respect in the church. Everyone expected an attack on the sins of modernity, or at the very least a rehearsal of the hot-button issues like contraception, abortion, and same-sex marriage. Instead, the pope surprised everybody with “Deus Caritas Est,” “God Is Love.”

At first the press concluded that the pope chose a “soft” topic because he wanted to avoid controversy early in his tenure. But Peter Steinfels

of the *New York Times* dug into the document and concluded that the pope said exactly what any Christian spokesperson ought to say, said what the world so desperately needs to hear today—namely that at the heart of the Christian religion, at the center of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is an idea so unique, so stunning, that for centuries most people have not been able to believe it: namely that at the heart of God is not anger, judgment, punishment, righteous indignation, but steadfast love.

Steinfels dug deeper still. The pope's encyclical was not a sentimental valentine—"All you need is love," he wrote—but an affirmation of the most astonishing idea, namely that "love is the primordial creative power that moves the universe," an "affirmation of the closing lines of Dante's *Divine Comedy:* 'the love that moves the sun and stars.'"

The importance of what the pope said, and this central concept of our faith, is punctuated by its absence in the increasingly violent and ugly world of religion and politics. People are genuinely afraid of religious intolerance. People are increasingly fearful of religion that insists that it has truth, the only truth, and that therefore those who do not agree are enemies of truth and enemies of God. 9/11 was at least partly a result of that way of thinking. People are genuinely afraid of religious intolerance and for good reason. A bombed Shiite mosque and hundreds of revenge killings are a reminder of the potential for evil inherent in any religion that tolerates no difference, no diversity, no doubts or questions.

Islam, however, has no monopoly on potentially violent fundamentalism. A Baptist minister from Kansas, Fred Phelps, and his family travel all over the country demonstrating, picketing, screaming hurtful insults at families of servicemen killed in Iraq. "God hates America" they scream at grieving families, because of what Phelps and his family think is moral laxity and sexual impurity. And Falwell and Robertson can be counted on to attribute public suffering and tragedy from natural disaster as God's punishment for sin.

The matter of the cartoons published first in a Danish newspaper, lampooning the Prophet Muhammad, is still much in the news, prompting continuing outrage and violence in the Islamic world and self-righteous lecturing on freedom of the press in the Western world.

The most helpful thing I read, however, was not by the national commentators on either side, but by a young Muslim man by the name of Eboo Patel. He is Executive Director of a remarkable project here in Chicago called the Interfaith Youth Core, an effort to bring together

for fun, study, discussion, and service projects, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim young people.

Our own Senior Highs participated in a program recently around Martin Luther King's birthday.

In the aftermath of the cartoon incident, Eboo issued a statement:

> "Do you believe in free speech?" people ask me.
>
> "To the teeth," I respond.
>
> "Do you think that some sources in the West deliberately distort Islam?" they prod.
>
> "Absolutely," I tell them
>
> "Are you hurt by the ridiculing of the Prophet in mainstream newspapers?" some wonder.
>
> "Deep in my heart," I say.
>
> They immediately dichotomize the discussion—Western values vs. Muslim values, free speech vs. cultural sensitivity. They push to the point of polarization and then demand that I pick one side.

That, Eboo contends, plays right into the hands of those who are determined that we have a war of civilizations, both Muslim and Western. "Both sides wrap themselves in principle and sharpen their spears."

Eboo condemns newspapers in the Arab and Muslim world that demonize Jews and defile Jewish sacred symbols. But there was a missed opportunity for Jewish and Christian leaders in the West to say what an evangelical Christian friend of his said to him: "I remember how deeply hurt I was a few years ago by art that desecrated Christian symbols. I think I know how Muslims feel about this. I want to tell them I wish they hadn't been hurt."

No treatise on free speech. No lecture. Just a simple statement that it hurts when your precious symbols are defiled and your prophet, your savior, your God, demeaned.

How about love?

This is no sentimental valentine. This is not to say that it doesn't matter how we live because God loves us anyhow. This is not a moral relativism that results from concluding that God doesn't care what we do or do not do. Quite the opposite. This is to say that God loves so unconditionally and passionately that nothing we do can stop God from loving. Nothing we can say or do will cause God to give up on us. There is nowhere we can go that God will not pursue us, relentlessly. When we stray, when we disobey, when we rebel, when we simply ignore God and God's will, God doesn't get angry so much as grieves, just like a mother or father is heartbroken and weeps when a child strays from home. But God does not and will not give up, will not stop loving us, will not stop trying to bring us home.

Huston Smith is a scholar of world religions and a Christian. He has written a book the critics think is an important one: *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*. He observes that the people who heard Jesus' disciples proclaiming Good News were impressed as much by what they saw as by the word they heard. Jesus' followers had been transformed, changed by something. They were new people.

Smith concludes that it was love that did it, "God's love was precisely what the first Christians did feel. They had experienced Jesus' love and became convinced that Jesus was God incarnate. Once that love reached them it could not be stopped."

Smith goes on to propose that just as the power hidden in the atom is only released by bombardment from without, so the love planted by God in every human soul is released and activated and called out by love's bombardment. What a fascinating thought. What a life-changing, world-changing idea!

A loving human being, Smith says, "is not produced by exhortations, rules, or threats. Love takes root in children only when it comes to them."

I have been blessed to be around children all my adult life. I am blessed now to have grandchildren, an abundance of them. I experience blessings on the second Sunday of each month, to administer the sacrament of Baptism on your behalf, to hold the babies and remind them and us that they are loved by an everlasting and unconditional love that will never change. "You belong to Jesus Christ forever," I am blessed to tell them.

There is a great moment when the connection of love happens. You can't just say to a baby "I'm glad you're here and I like you a lot" and

hope he or she understands. So we whistle and make funny noises and sing songs, and talk baby talk, hoping for some response.

Alex is only four months old. So when I see him I tell him how much I love him and that I'll take him to the zoo and Wrigley Field and buy him a hot dog, which his mother probably won't do, and that I hope he'll grow up to be a good boy and a Cubs fan. I don't think he understands. But every now and then, he furrows his brow and looks me intently in the eye during my monologue, and there is a flicker of a smile at first, and then a full smile, and occasionally a sound, an attempt at a response, a soft chuckle. He knows, I think, that he's loved, and quite spontaneously, quite naturally—because as Huston Smith said, God put it there—he responds, and love, his own unique love, is activated and called out of him.

It is a great moment, and I'll risk being maudlin by suggesting that it is a great metaphor for the Divine–human encounter, God's steadfast love.

Lent begins somberly, solemnly. Lent begins with Jesus in the desert, dry, hungry, alone, maybe full of doubt and misgiving about his own life and his prospects; maybe full of uncertainty about what he is supposed to do next; maybe tired of the daily routine of his life, bored; maybe feeling alienated from his family; maybe feeling distant from and impatient and alienated from God even.

But angels come and minister to him, and he learns that there is nowhere he can go, even the driest, loneliest desert, that God's steadfast love cannot find him and come to him and embrace him and hold him and then call out of him his own fierce, unconditional love, his own love that will take him to the crisis of Good Friday and his cross and death—still loving, loving to the last, still willing to live his life, every minute of it, right up to the last minute, loving his friends, you and me, the whole wide world, answering God's steadfast, faithful love.

How can you measure a life?

How about love?

Amen.